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SUBJECT: Iraq phantom haunts Dutch government

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Long resistant to calls for a parliamentary inquiry into the Dutch government's support for the U.S. intervention in Iraq, Prime Minister Balkenende surprisingly proposed the establishment of an independent investigation by a blue-ribbon panel on February 2. This will buy time and may clarify some outstanding questions, but it is unlikely to silence the opposition's quest to demonstrate the Netherlands supported the war in Iraq on faulty grounds. End summary.

¶2. (U) The Problem: For years, the leftwing opposition in the Dutch parliament has pressed for a parliamentary inquiry into the government's arguments for extending political support to the U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq in March 2003, which it opposed. Subsequent disclosures in the U.S. and Britain media strengthened the opposition's conviction the Netherlands had supported this war on faulty grounds or the government had not told it the whole truth.

¶3. (U) PM Balkenende consistently defended his government's position in countless parliamentary debates maintaining the government had fully informed parliament and there were no secrets about the reasons for the Dutch government's support. He had repeatedly pointed to Iraq's failure to comply with a series of UNSC resolutions (and not the possible presence of WMD). Classified intelligence reports were supposed to have had little impact on the government's decisionmaking.

¶4. (SBU) New press disclosures re-inforced the impression the government was hiding something. For example, in a January 29, 2009 interview, former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage claimed the U.S. had requested Dutch military support in Iraq and Dutch political support had helped secure the appointment of former Dutch Foreign Minister Jaap de Hoop Scheffer to NATO Secretary General and had persuaded Armitage to intervene personally to avoid sanctions against the Netherlands because of its response to trafficking in persons issues. Although Balkenende denied all the allegations, pressure, even from within his own party (the Christian Democrats - CDA), to respond was growing and his credibility was increasingly called into question.

¶6. (U) The Solution: On February 2, Balkenende proposed establishing an independent committee to look into the question of Dutch decision-making leading up to the Cabinet's decision to support the U.S. in Iraq. The committee will be headed by Willibrord Davids, former President of the Dutch Supreme Court (who is free to choose his own committee but has been asked to include Ministers of State (senior statesmen)). Announcing "we have nothing to hide," the PM said the committee would have full access to all government information and said it would be able to address all of parliament's questions and concerns. The committee is to have its report ready by November 1.

¶7. (U) The Response: The coalition parties welcomed the PM's proposal. Since they have a majority in parliament, the committee

will be set up as the PM suggested. The opposition, however, felt parliament was being sidelined and still insisted on its own inquiry. Balkenende was accused of "delaying tactics."

18. (SBU) Comment: Balkenende is opposed to a parliamentary inquiry because he wants to avoid having doubt cast on the cabinet decision to support the intervention in Iraq. An inquiry suggests that decision was not taken for the right reasons. A parliamentary inquiry would also require the PM and other key players to testify under oath and in public. This independent committee proposal under oath and in public. This independent committee proposal clearly buys the PM time, and he hopes interest in Iraq will fade in the meantime. In the best-case scenario, the committee's report will answer all outstanding questions, but it is unlikely the committee's report will persuade the opposition to give up. The opposition wants someone in the government to admit the Netherlands never should have supported the U.S. in Iraq - and to apologize. This is not something the government will do. So, the opposition will probably call for a parliamentary inquiry after the report is issued. The same process happened when the Dutch involvement in Srebrenica in 1995 was investigated - multiple studies followed by a parliamentary inquiry which did not turn up any new evidence. That process, however, brought down the government - a result unlikely in this case.

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End Comment.

Gallagher